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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000173

SIPDIS

DHAHRAN SENDS,
PASS TO NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: THE THIRTEEN DAYS OF ASHURA IN QATIF

REF: A. A: 09 RIYADH 1
[1](#)B. B: 08 RIYADH 121

Classified By: CG Joseph Kenny for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

(C) Key Points:

-- The Shi'a of Qatif were allowed to publicly commemorate Ashura with minimal interference from Saudi government authorities.

-- However, plans for seven villages in the Qatif area to assemble in Gudaiah for the reenactment of the Battle of Karbala were blocked by police forces.

-- Qatifi social activists organized a program for Sunnis to participate in and learn about the Ashura celebrations.

-- Throughout the 13 days of Ashura, the bulk of the lectures given by key Shi'a community leaders in the Eastern Province (EP) avoided political topics.

(C) Comment:

-- The Shi'a of Qatif continue to enjoy a relative amount of freedom to publicly celebrate the highly important religious celebration of Ashura (Reftel B). The official Sunni religious establishment in Saudi Arabia does not officially recognize Ashura. The police harassment of Qatifis in Gudaiah is more likely a reflection of the Saudi Arabian Government's (SAG) fears of political unrest and demonstrations related to Gaza than the public practice of Ashura rituals. Also, the outreach effort by Qatifi Shi'a community leaders to their Sunni compatriots is a testament to the desire on the part of the Shi'a to be an integral part of the civil society here in the EP and in the Kingdom as a whole. As a 'graduate' of a USG-sponsored visitor program, the organizer is a tangible example of how these programs can inspire positive social progress to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

End key points and comment.

[1](#)1. (SBU) This year's Ashura was overshadowed by the war in Gaza and Saudi security forces were in full force for fear of any impromptu political demonstrations. In late December, EP authorities arrested close to 30 Shi'a who had demonstrated against the Israeli offensive in Gaza, making for an especially tense environment during Ashura (Reftel A).

[1](#)2. (SBU) Nevertheless, Consulate General Dhahran contacts and local news sources confirmed that on January 7 the highly revered Shi'a commemoration of Ashura was publicly celebrated in Qatif with minimal SAG interference. More than ten

thousand Saudi Shi'a reportedly took to the streets to participate in marches, listen to speeches and reenact the historic Battle of Karbala, where the Shi'a believe that Prophet Mohammed's grandson Imam Hussein bin Ali was martyred by the Umayyad Caliphate. This is a sad occasion and is marked by public acts of penance such as self-flagellation and mourning.

¶3. (C) Although the most significant event during Ashura falls on the tenth day of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar); Shi'a sheikhs and community leaders give special lectures or sermons throughout the first 13 days of the month. One prominent Shi'a journalist conducted a two-page analysis of the themes of the lectures given by the most popular Shi'a leaders in the EP; including Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, Sheikh Fawzi al-Saif, Sheikh Hassan al-Khuwailidi and Mr. Monir al-Khabaz. PolOff met with the journalist and discussed his findings.

¶4. (C) The journalist found that nearly half of the 70 plus lectures he analyzed concentrated on familial, spiritual and religious topics. Despite the war in Gaza and SAG fears of Ashura events turning into a massive political demonstration, only ten percent of lectures dealt with political matters, predominantly Shi'a identity and discrimination. The author demonstrated his disappointment that discussions of women's issues represented merely four percent of the lectures analyzed. Finally, he highlighted the growing popularity of more interactive Ashura events, such as the reenactment of the Battle of Karbala, as opposed to merely listening to the traditional speeches and sermons given at husseiniyyas.

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¶5. (SBU) However, the war in Gaza was not completely ignored. On January 7, the most prominent Shi'a religious leader in Qatif, Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, publicly criticized the weakness of Arab nations in standing up for Gaza. Also, a large Palestinian flag was reportedly raised atop the Tarout Fort in Qatif, which the police promptly removed.

¶6. (SBU) Although Saudi security forces allowed the Qatifi Shi'a to take part in most Ashura activities, the police did prevent a large gathering in Gudaih. Thousands of Shi'a from more than a half dozen Qatifi villages planned to converge onto a large playground in Gudaih to reenact the Battle of Karbala. However, police forces surrounded the village and prevented any non-residents from entering.

¶7. (C) A prominent Shi'a social activist and his wife organized a 'cultural exchange program,' which invited open-minded Sunni professors, journalists and even a Sunni sheikh to learn about the Ashura celebration. This activist, a close contact of the Consulate, said that many Shi'a community leaders contributed to a fund to pay all of the visitors' expenses and arranged for religious lectures and discussions. Less than a dozen of the 40 or so Sunni invitees accepted the invitation to Qatif. (Note: Our contact went to the U.S. on a USG-sponsored International Visitor Program and his wife is scheduled to go on one later this year. End note.)

(Approved: JKenny)
RUNDELL